SURROUNDED
November 6, 2005

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 34:1–10
Hebrews 11:1–3, 12:1–2

"Therefore since we are surrounded
by so great a cloud of witness . . .
let us run with perseverance the race
that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV)

We do not do it alone of course. We are companioned through life. . . .
Underneath it all, holding us up as we change, are the people who love us.
However much we find ourselves in the throes of life,
they stand by until we land again on solid ground, find ourselves again,
get up in the morning ready to start over. Because of them we stay on the path.
They provide the unchanging foundations of love that enable us to risk change.
The people who love us prod us––enable us––to grow.
And God loves us. . . . God loves me and wants me to grow.
I am trying, before I die, to learn to trust this continual going into the unknown.
I better live a long, long life.

Joan Chittister, OSB
Called to Question

It is the fundamental assertion of our faith that we are not alone. We are surrounded by the loving presence of the One who created us. Furthermore, we are surrounded by all those who have loved us, some of whom are alive and with us, and whose loving presence in our lives is more precious and important than we can say. And we are surrounded by the loving presence of all those who have gone before us, ones we loved and lost, ones who loved us and imprinted us forever with their love, ones whose faith and commitment shaped not only the institutions we hold dear, but us, as well. They are our saints. Together they are our Communion of Saints.

By happy coincidence, All Saints' Sunday coincides this year with a celebration of the ordination of women here in Chicago this weekend, and this year, and next year throughout the whole Presbyterian family.

At a time when very few churches were paying attention to the role of women, not to mention actually electing women to leadership positions, the Presbyterian Church General Assembly changed its position and allowed women to serve as Deacons in 1906.

In 1930 our church changed its position again and provided for women to be elected as Elders and to serve on local church Sessions.

And finally, in 1956, the Presbyterian Church decided that women could be elected and serve as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

Here at Fourth Presbyterian Church, the late Reba Staggs was elected a Deacon in 1958.

And in 1972 Miss Staggs joined Dr. Helen Beiser as the first women to serve as Elders, 42 years after the denomination changed the rules. No one every accused us of acting impulsively!

And then, in 1963, Leslie J. Anbari was called to serve as an Assistant Pastor, the first clergywoman to join the staff of Fourth Presbyterian Church. Her ministry began a line of faithful clergywomen who have led and shaped this congregation in very significant ways.

Lesslie Anbari	1963–1966
Deborah Kapp	1981–1991
Linda Loving	1986–1995
Christine Chakoian	1986–1992
Nancy Hutchison Enderle	1992–1998
Rhashell Hunter	1994–1998
Carol Allen	1996–2005
Sarah Sarchet Butter	1998–2002
Dana Ferguson	1997
Donna Gray	2000
Joanna Adams	2001–2004
Alice Trowbridge	2004
Elizabeth Andrews	2005

How nice to be surrounded by that cloud of witnesses today.

In his recent book, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, William Sloan Coffin speaks for many of us by remembering that when he was young, “women taught in grammar and high schools, but rarely at universities. They were nurses but hardly ever doctors. They were secretaries but hardly ever law partners, fewer yet were clergy.” As a consequence, Coffin says, he is a “recovering chauvinist.”

My experience was similar. I negotiated four years of college and four years of Divinity School without encountering a single woman professor. The Presbyterian Church started ordaining women to the ministry seven years before I was ordained but I never met a woman clergyperson until the early seventies. With that record, I turned to my colleague, Dana Ferguson, who is the Executive Associate Pastor at Fourth Church, my partner, for some help with this sermon. In light of that list of saints, without whom this church is not even imaginable, I thought it would be important for us to hear from one of them, and I asked Dana to reflect on her experience. I asked her, "How did you come to be a minister? Where did the idea to go to seminary and seek ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament come from?"

Dana Ferguson, Executive Associate Pastor:

When I graduated from college, I gave my parents a little plaque that read, "I am because of my parent's love." It is true, yet it is only part of the story. I am because of the love of many and because of the love of God.

I can remember clearly at a young age of maybe 10 or 11 thinking I would be the first female preacher. Growing up in rural Mississippi, I had no idea there was such a thing. I was too shy to voice it but I thought it and dreamed it and believed it.

My mother was the first woman elected Elder by our small Presbyterian congregation. She went to tell her mother, a member of the only Presbyterian congregation in her nearby town, a conservative PCA church. "I've been elected Elder," shared my mom proudly with her mother. "Why Betsy," said my grandmother, "that is just lovely but please don't tell my friends." She meant both. She thought it was lovely and good but knew her friends wouldn't.

I grew up in that mostly conservative, Bible Belt, Deep South but somehow it didn't discourage me. There is the strong possibility that I was too naive or ditsy or ignorant to understand the messages that I wasn't welcome as a leader because I was female. And yet I suspect that much of the reason I missed those messages was because of my Presbyterian heritage and my familial heritage.

My mother was one among many formidable presences in my life. My grandmothers were competent, strong, and respected businesswomen and business owners in an era and area when such was rare. My "Annie Mama," as we called my grandmother, and her sister, "Mamie," ran the Dime Store

in Sardis, Mississippi and between the two of them––both divorced women––raised five daughters together. My grandmother Ferguson ran the family funeral business that was handed down to her by her parents. All were faithful and committed churchwomen. This rich blood is much of who I am, but not all.

I am a child of the Presbyterian faith. Praise God! I was nurtured and taught by the likes of those I would call the saints in my life: Ms. Margie, and Ms. Sarah Dell, and the list goes on. The names on this list aren't confined only to women. The list includes wise and patient youth leaders who loved me and held me tight through the tough years of high school when I rebelled as best and as hard as I could in the face of tragic deaths of a number of classmates from car accidents and suicides. Just as the church does, they never gave up on me, never let me go, never stopped telling me I was one of God's beloved and chosen.

That was a monumental message to me. But it didn't go without another: the belief that the world is full of the goodness of God and that we are God's people and resources and we are called to be about the business of sharing those resources. One of my first clear memories of such serving was during my elementary school years. A new student came to our small little school and my mom, a teacher, knew this little girl didn't have many toys in her home. My sister and I were instructed to gather a dozen or so of our Barbie dolls as a gift for her. (I suspect that I have now made the colossal mistake of all mistakes mentioning Barbies on a feminist Sunday, but they were the choice of toys in the day.) We were instructed that our gifts couldn't be the throwaway kind with the ratty hair and missing shoes. They were to be in good and fine shape. Liz and I painfully picked out those dolls, even a proper Barbie carrying case, and delivered them cheerfully as we could to this new student.

My family, my teachers, my mentors, my colleagues have taught me over and over that I am important and valued and that all the world's people are such. It is through these people that I have continually heard God's affirmation of the call to ministry that I heard even at a very young age.

I am here physically and literally because countless generations felt that each individual life was precious and valued, valued enough to dedicate lives to the world of medicine and, more particularly, to the research and work of curing cancer. Members of the world of medicine were able to save my life on more than one occasion.

I am here spiritually because people showed me God's love for me and for this world in quite and profound ways. I am here in a long line of distinguished female pastors because many women before me did the hard work of blazing a trail for others of us to follow. And I am here because of the bold and faithful ministry of congregations like Fourth Church and

Idlewild Church where I first served in Memphis, Tennessee, the first church in its Presbytery to call a female to its pastoral staff.

I am because of so many who have gone before me, stood with me, and worked along side me with great faith and hope in God's power to make us––each and every one of us, male and female, young and old, black and white––even more wise and faithful servants than we are today.

By that, I am deeply blessed and privileged. Praise be to God and God's faithful. Amen.

The idea of the ordination of women is mentioned in the records of the Presbyterian Church in 1832––negatively. The General Assembly sent a letter that year to all the Presbyterian churches, which included this instruction on the subject: "To teach and exhort or to lead in prayer, in public . . . is clearly forbidden to women in (scripture)."

124 years later, in 1956, the Church changed its mind and allowed the ordination of women to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. The Reverend Margaret Towner was the first woman to be ordained.

I like to remember today all those thousands of women who kept raising the subject, kept pushing back, kept insisting that the church's position was surely not God's position; women who were no doubt criticized, humiliated, and scorned, but who kept the faith and ran the race with perseverance.

The church moves exceedingly slowly. In fact, during reunion negotiations with the Southern Presbyterian Church in the 1980s, there were enough congregations who refused to ordain women on Biblical grounds that they broke away and founded the Presbyterian Church in America, which does not ordain women and whose most public spokesperson is televangelist James Kennedy of Coral Gables, Florida.

Other churches move slowly, too. Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, is one of many Roman Catholic voices urging her church to change its position on this issue. She recalls the day when the irony of the situation hit her. She was sitting in the Basilica of the Immacualte Conception in Washington as an observer at the opening liturgy of the annual Bishop's conference.

> A few of us were huddled together in one of the thick, dark pews halfway back in the center aisle of the great vacant void. [The organ roared.] The Bishops came marching in, 250 of them in white

> cassocks and colored stoles, the light of the clerestory windows shining of their miters. I had never seen so much pomp for so little circumstance. I had never felt smaller and less a part of the church. I had never felt more like an uninvited guest in my own house. (*Called to Question*, p. 18)

The church can, and will, pray God, change. It happens painfully slowly, but change does happen. Sometimes we talk about it for a century, but the Presbyterian Church changed its position on slavery (which it was sure was approved by scripture), and the role of women, and the use of artificial methods of birth control, and divorce and remarriage, and, of course, the ordination of women. And today, along with the rest of the church, we find ourselves struggling with the issue of sexual orientation and whether gay and lesbian Presbyterians have the same rights as the rest of us and the same responsibility to follow God's call to serve and lead. And, ironically, those who oppose, who do so frequently, oppose on the very same grounds of biblical authority that their forerunners used to oppose the ordination of women and the abolition of slavery: "You can't do it because the Bible says so." It takes the church several centuries to resolve the really big issues, Martin Marty says. But change happens and this, I am absolutely confident, will change too.

It is a good day to remember those whose faithfulness, courage, and grace brought about positive change. The very day we remember that great mystery that we are not alone but are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, the Communion of Saints.

Barbara Brown Taylor says we have a basic human need to "remember those who have died, to acknowledge the gulf between the living and the dead, but also to reach across it, to recognize those who have gone before us." Madeleine L'Engle writes, "We are not meant to be separated from those who have gone before."

The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews understood that. He was writing to people who perhaps more than anyone in history needed some encouragement. He puts them in touch with those who have gone before. The early Christians in the Roman Empire were facing a truly frightening future. There weren't very many of them. They were poor, weak, increasingly despised by their own communities, and now Rome itself was beginning to regard them as dangerous traitors. Jesus was gone. All the Apostles were dead now. And the author of Hebrews, in the great eleventh chapter, reminds them of their ancestors, their faith:

- By faith Abraham and Sarah moved and Moses led.
- By faith your people passed through the sea.

- By faith Gideon, Samson, and David led and fought and followed faithfully.
- By faith your own fathers and mothers were persecuted, tortured, martyred and endured.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is before us.”

And so we are surrounded by all those who prepared the way for us. We are surrounded by all those we loved and have lost … the great cloud of witnesses. I love that image. This church, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses: those who sat in these pews, and preached from this pulpit, and played the organ, and sang in the choir, and taught the children, and visited the sick, and wrestled with the finances. A cloud of witnesses surrounding us, encouraging, cheering us on to be faithful in our day, to run with perseverance the race that is before us. They are our Communion of Saints.

And each one of us is surrounded too by our own cloud of witnesses: our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our teachers, mentors, friends near and far who inspired us and loved us enough to expect much of us and prodded us to be all we could be.

They are a presence in our lives. Have you noticed how sometimes the older you become the more you seem to be in relationship with those who have gone before you? We says things like “Wouldn’t he have been proud?” or “Wouldn’t she have loved all these grandchildren?” in a way that suggests that he, somehow, is proud and that she, somehow, in the mystery of God’s love, is loving these grandchildren. Have you noticed that as the years go by you know and understand your own parents better?

In Mitch Albom’s bestseller *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, the main character, Eddie, a maintenance man at an amusement park, dies in an accident, ending a modest life in which he felt trapped. He then goes to heaven and meets five people who show him how mysteriously but profoundly his life was intertwined with the lives of others, some of whom he didn’t even know at all and some he knew intimately. One of these people is his own father from whom he was alienated by a lifetime of neglect, occasional violence, and finally a terrible silence. When his father, drunk, raised a fist to strike him, Eddie, a strong young man, fought back. His father simply stopped talking to him. But Eddie never stopped wanting, needing his father’s love. Neither man ever broke the silence. In heaven, Eddie learns why his father was the way he was, learns about his father’s courage and loyalty, and finally learns about his father’s love. Eddie has the opportunity in heaven to forgive and reconcile.

Albom is no theologian, but that is part of what the notion of the Communion of Saints is about. Relationships do not end with death. For some it is important and healing to keep on working on unresolved issues, unresolved conflict, learning to accept and forgive and reconcile with a parent, a child, a friend. The Communion of Saints is an attempt to put words to the reality that we are not alone. We are surrounded by the loving presence of the One who created us and the loving, encouraging presence of all those who have gone before us.

The final mystery of our faith, for which we stretch to find words big enough, is that nothing of love is ever lost, that in Jesus Christ, his cross and resurrection, we can, with confidence, entrust those who were and are dear to us to God's love.

The final mystery of our faith is that in Jesus Christ you and I are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and that

> "When the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Amen.